

January, 2000

**OP-ED BY REPRESENTATIVE JAN SCHAKOWSKY FOR SECURE RETIREMENT
MAGAZINE**

"DIGNITY FOR NURSING HOME RESIDENTS"

Dignity is a precious thing. Unfortunately, many seniors in nursing homes spend their days without it. That should not be happening in 21st Century America.

Older Americans know that our nation is enjoying the greatest economic prosperity in the history of mankind. What they want and deserve is a Medicare prescription drug coverage that is universal, voluntary, and affordable; a guarantee that the government will deliver on its promise for Social Security; and long term care that is second to none. We have the resources, so what are we waiting for?

I worked closely with the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare and the National Citizen Coalition for Nursing Home Reform to craft the Quality Care for Nursing Home Patients Act, H.R. 5166. This bill would offer real protections to seniors in nursing homes and strengthen federal standards by guaranteeing minimum staffing levels in nursing homes. The concept is simple: nursing homes need to have enough well trained staff to ensure every resident gets prompt and quality care.

The evidence is overwhelming that nursing home residents are not receiving the proper care. And a major contributor to the lack of quality care is the lack of properly trained health care providers. I released a report in March that found that inadequate staffing is a major contributor to the violations that take place in nursing homes in Chicago. The report cited an example of a nursing home where a single nurse aide was left to care for an entire floor of 68 residents in the middle of the afternoon. As a result of staff shortages, seniors were left in the same position and in soiled diapers for hours and suffered from bedsores, malnutrition, and a host of other disturbing and preventable ailments. This summer, the Health Care Financing Administration found that adequate staffing ratios and quality care go hand in hand.

H.R. 5166 sets minimum administration and staffing ratio standards for nursing homes that receive Medicare and/or Medicaid funding, while requiring that the Health Care Financing Administration to provide adequate reimbursement to meet those standards. Finally, the bill requires that information on staffing levels be made available to patients, their families, and the public.

Senior citizens should not have to spend another day enduring humiliation and at times, life-threatening mistreatment, in nursing homes. Public policy can help assure that old age and frailty do not equal a loss of dignity anywhere in this great nation.